



PARLIAMENT OF AUSTRALIA
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Media Release

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“Quicksmart”

The UNE early intervention Literacy and Numeracy Program helping kids catch up

The University of New England early intervention learning program known as “Quicksmart” received significant exposure in the Federal Parliament this week when the Independent Member for New England, Tony Windsor spoke of its successes during a “Matter of Public Importance” debate on Wednesday afternoon.

The topic for the day’s MPI moved by Mr Windsor was “Improving Educational Pathways for Country Australians” and had support from both the major parties.

Mr Windsor told the Parliament:

Mr WINDSOR (New England) (3:52 PM) —I thank members for endorsing what I believe is a very significant motion before the House, particularly for those of us who reside in country Australia. At the outset, I state that I would like to see this debate take place in a constructive sense as to the sorts of things that can happen in pathways to improve education in country areas. There are some issues out there at the moment and some of those have been talked about today. I believe there are an enormous number of positive things that can occur into the future, not least of which is a modern broadband network across regional Australia that may well have enormous implications for not only education but also other aspects of country life.

There will be a number of issues discussed today, but I intend to use most of my time to talk about one initiative that started at the University of New England, which is in my electorate. It was put together by the National Centre of Science, Information and Communication Technology, and Mathematics Education for Rural and Regional Australia. As I said, it is based at the University of New England. It is headed by Professor John Pegg, who is ably assisted by Associate Professor Lorraine Graham. I believe the program that I refer to has enormous potential for students at our primary schools—the sorts of students we all know of—who are starting to lag behind in their achievement levels. We have all seen it in the past and we are seeing it now. For students who start to lag behind in achievement levels, their confidence levels, belief in themselves and self-esteem drop off exponentially over time if neglected. When I was at school, they were the kids who were sent outside to mow the lawn and we just assumed that they would drift through life and find a way of their own. We have always struggled to find programs that can bring those young people back to the fold, in a sense, when they get behind and take them forward in their achievement.

I believe the program that I refer to today is probably the only program where there is empirical evidence that we have something that is working. It is called the QuickSmart program. It has been used to improve literacy and numeracy since 2001. It was set up at the University of New England. It has been in use across most of the states and territories, including the Northern Territory. I will refer to some evidence in relation to the Northern Territory

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in a minute, particularly in terms of Aboriginal children. It has been used with enormous success. This year there will be something like 200 schools across Australia using the QuickSmart program. It is about helping those kids who might be three or four years behind in their literacy or numeracy. They might be 10, 11 or 12 years old. It is a 30-week interventionist program where the children are taken out of the classroom for a period of time—I think it is three times a week—and given specialist teaching. It is a reasonably expensive program—not very expensive—but, given the outcomes of this program, it is very cheap. One of the reasons for raising it today is to make sure that the government is well aware of this program and looks to the future with the evidence coming out of this.

The University of New England is monitoring the progress of the students. In some cases, some of the programs used are good while the child is on the program and then there may well be a drop-off in the pathway that the child is achieving at school. Part of the research that the University of New England is doing is to not only develop the program in the first place but also follow it, question it and evaluate it against other comparisons from the various state and territory departments of education. On all levels there is tremendous achievement occurring through this particular program. The rate at which some of these children are improving, not only during the program but two, three, four or five years on, has been determined at QuickSmart. So they have been not only able to bring some of these kids forward three or four years but also able to maintain that push, so that children who would have left school at an early age, disappointed and assuming they are failures in academic ability, are lifted and then push themselves forward. With the research that has been done by following those students through the program and through their progress long after the program is finished, the empirical evidence indicates that those children are maintaining that pathway.

Whenever I talk to schools, school principals or teachers who are involved with this program, they all say that it works and that they have never seen anything like it: the way in which it works, the way in which it lifts the children and the way in which the children enjoy the process. Obviously, they are building their own confidence levels as the process goes on. I will reflect on a couple of examples at this point. I have a quote from one student:

When I am in QuickSmart I really feel smart—like I am not dumb any more. When I wasn't doing QuickSmart I felt dumb. I didn't really know how to do maths but it helped me in a lot of ways, like how to do problems and teaching me all my times tables. If it wasn't for QuickSmart I don't know where I would be right now. I love QuickSmart.

I have watched videos of the students being taught and you can see the interaction and the way in which the confidence and academic levels build over a period of time. A parent says:

QuickSmart has had a huge effect on our daughter's performance at school—most notably the Basic Skills results. In Year 3 she was in the bottom 30% of the state. This year, in Year 5, she was in the top 30%. She is able to complete homework tasks without much assistance. She was already confident and capable with all other areas of the curriculum but was not confident with maths. Her confidence has increased considerably.

Another recommendation is from Peter Westwood, an emeritus academic at Flinders University and the University of Hong Kong. He says:

QuickSmart is clearly one of the few (possibly the only) intervention programs implemented in Australia to have been subjected to such rigorous and thoughtful evaluation over a period of almost nine years and across diverse settings. As such, it certainly merits the description of an evidence-based approach.

A research document on QuickSmart produced in the Northern Territory says:

In the Northern Territory, data collected over the past three years indicates that schools can expect on average a 10% improvement on standardised test results of QuickSmart students in the first year of implementation and that jumps to approximately 20% improvement in the second and subsequent years of implementation.

I know the member for Page has been very supportive of this program and has been working with it in her electorate for some years. Over the last five years in the Lismore diocese, the results of QuickSmart students in the state-wide basic skills tests improved substantially. With numeracy assessments, 92 per cent of students improved by at least one band and 40 per cent of students improved by at least two bands. I think that gives an indication of the empirical evidence that this research is starting to show. Forty-two of the 44 Orara High School students, at Coffs Harbour, who undertook the QuickSmart program in 2006 were above benchmark on the 2008 national

NAPLAN test in year 9. The two students who performed below benchmark were diagnosed as IM students in year 7. Each of these students, however, managed above-average growth for the period 2006-08.

Interestingly enough, the principal of that school was so enthusiastic about the program that he put 44 students on it to bring them forward—not the top students, but students who were behind. The next year the school lost its disadvantaged schools money because it had lifted its results. It makes me wonder what we are trying to achieve with some of the programs we have put in place.

QuickSmart has received many awards: the American Educational Research Association Award, the Learning Difficulties Australia Tertiary Student Award and the Vice-Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Research. I will not go through them all, but anybody who is interested in this particular program should look very seriously at it. In the year ahead I think something like 200 schools will be participating in the QuickSmart program.

The people at the university whose brainchild this has been, John Pegg and Lorraine Graham, have done an extraordinary job in promoting this program—a lot of it in their private time. This is not about money-making for them as individuals or for the university. It is about putting in place a program that actually delivers. If we are serious about eradicating a degree of delinquency in our children, if we are serious about doing something about closing the gap for Aboriginal kids and if we are serious about really bringing people forward so that they can achieve academically at universities later on et cetera, we have to look at these sorts of programs. Even though this does take time and money, I would urge all members to find out where this program is working within their electorates—city or country—and have a look at the program and the way it is being conducted, and the results. Go and talk to the principals that are conducting this. I know the principals in my area, from every school that the program goes to, just cannot believe the results they are getting with kids that they would have once sent out to mow the lawn. They just cannot believe the results they are getting.

I thank the minister as well, because I spoke with her earlier about the QuickSmart program and I have had meetings with some of her senior people in the past about the program. I know the minister is at an important meeting with the Prime Minister at the moment but I thank her for her for giving her attention to the program. One of the things I would like the minister to look at closely, though, is the situation in relation to TAFE. There is a lot of talk in this place about skills development and education in terms of the competition between private providers and TAFE. I know people have different philosophical views in relation to that but in country locations there are areas where, if TAFE is weakened much more by the private providers coming in and then moving out, we will run the risk of having quite large areas that may not be serviced in respect of the skills that we are all saying we need out there—particularly when the economic recovery comes on.

The youth allowance has been debated at length and I have supported the government on the amendments, but there are still some issues there. I would like the minister to clarify, publicly, the 90-minute distance test for country students being able to get to a university, because I think it is not well enough known in the community. It means that most students who do not live near a university will be able to apply for some form of youth allowance through the income test if they cannot get to a university within 90 minutes.

In conclusion, I congratulate one of the great organisations of rural and regional areas—the Isolated Children's Parents Association. I think they are an extraordinary group of people who represent their constituency in a very great way and when they come to Canberra I think everybody from the Prime Minister down knows that they are very serious about these issues. *(Time expired)*